

Stranger in a Land: Late-Antique and Medieval Narratives on Foreigners and Exile

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The conference “Stranger in a Land: Late-Antique and Medieval Narratives on Foreigners and Exile” was organized as a joint project of the University of Córdoba, the University of Warsaw, the Stockholm School of Theology and the University of Tel Aviv and funded by the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS). It was held during three days in the Casa Árabe in Córdoba and brought together the new insights of 26 scholars from Europe, the United States, and Israel. The rich contributions and the lively discussions they initiated covered a wide range of religious, historical, geographical, and linguistic aspects related to the concept of “stranger” and inspire to further interdisciplinary research and exchange.

The opening session, chaired by J.P. Monferrer-Sala from the University of Córdoba, examined *The Concepts of Stranger and Estrangement in Canonical Texts*. As Ł. Niesiolowski-Spanò had to cancel his venue, the first presentation on “Enclave Rhetoric in the Qur’ān” was held by M. Bjerregaard Mortensen from the Université libre de Bruxelles. Drawing on E.P. Sanders’¹ argument that Palestinian literature shows a preoccupation mainly with “staying in” (that is, maintaining the covenant with God) rather than “getting in” (as Israel cannot earn God’s grace), she argued that a similar concern is exhibited in the Qur’ān. According to her, the qur’ānic focus on the Hijrah narrative, fostering a certain “ideal of estrangement” as marker of religious devotion², reflects an attempt to re-actualize the original emigration that led to the creation of the early qur’ānic

¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

² Cf. passages like Q 2:218, 8:72, 9:20, 22:58, and 48:11.

community. In this, the rhetoric implemented in the Qur'ān fits Mary Douglas³ description of the “enclave”, as preoccupied with fuelling the tension between the group and the evil, outside world⁴ for the purpose of boundary maintenance.

F.L. Roig Lanzillotta from the University of Groningen presented the second and last paper in this first session, “Strangers on the Earth: Two Nag Hammadi Texts on Human Exile in the Physical World.” Building on the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II, 6) and the *Authoritative Teaching* (VI, 3) and the studies by G.W. McRae he challenged the traditional view inherited from anti-heretical writings on Gnostics as anti-cosmic dualists. He argued that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi corpus rather suggests the existence of a broad spectrum of attitudes towards the physical world in early Christianity and showed that these two treatises in particular represent a bipartite monistic cosmology opposing divine and earthly realm reminiscent of the platonic moderate dualism.

Session two was devoted to *Conceptions of “the Other” and the Exile in Medieval Thought and Traditional Literature* and chaired by M. Wilk from the University of Warsaw. It opened with a presentation by M. Zawadowska from the University of Warsaw and the Jewish Historical Institute, who argued against the traditional identification of Judah Halevi's *Book of the Kuzari* as polemical against Karaite Judaism, as it does not strictly speaking describe Karaites as “heretics” (although he uses the term for Sadducees and Boethusians) and was in fact approved by some Karaites. She showed evidence of the fact that Halevi pictured Karaites in as ambivalent a way as Rabbanites and questioned his motivation in writing the *Kuzari*, concluding that he probably pursued a general critique of Judaism, aiming at a reconciliation between these religious currents and encouraging both of them to change for the better.

In the next paper on “Exile and Estrangement in the Thought of Baḥya ibn Paqūda and Judah Halevi”, the independent researcher E. Krinis presented the deeply contrasting worldviews of these two

³ M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness. The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ The unjust past is illustrated in passages like Q 59:8 and 16:110 and the danger of the outside world in Q 4:89 for example.

figures of Judeo-Andalusian culture through their treatment of the related concepts of “exile” (Hebr. *gālūt*) and “estrangement” (Arab. *ḡurba*). While Baḥya reshapes the exilic experience not as a historic, but as an individual, existential one, Halevi emphasizes the national dimension of the exile, which threatens the relationship between God and his people, and stresses the necessity of travelling to the occupied holy land to live there as a “stranger” (Arab. *ḡarīb*), just like the biblical patriarchs. Ironically, as a result, both Baḥya and Halevi find themselves in conflict with their socio-cultural environment, either implicitly, or explicitly.

The last presentation in this unit, “‘Banished from its World’. The Image of Fallen Soul in al-Suhrawardī’s *al-Wāridāt wa-al-Taqdīsāt* (The Divine Inspirations and Sanctifications)” was held by Ł. Piątak from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, who currently prepares a critical edition of the so far unpublished manuscript. He supported the idea of the influence on Muslim religious thought of the Gnostic and Neoplatonic paradigms on the divine part of the human as alien to this world, and especially on the mystic author al-Suhrawardī. In *al-wāridāt wa-al-taqdīsāt*, the twelve-century philosopher depicts the “soul” (Arab. *nafs*) or “light” (Arab. *nūr*) as an intermediate being, originating from the realm of spiritual light and forced to descend to the dark material world by its attachment to the body. In line with his description of this situation as an “exile” in the West in *qiṣṣat al-ḡurba al-ḡarbiyya* “The Tale of the Western Exile,” he then assimilates the soul to a “stranger” lost in a dangerous land. Illumination is the only possible way for the soul to return to its homeland.

A. Ashur from the Research Authority of Orot Israel College opened the third session on *Converts and Community Boundaries in the World of the Genizah* chaired by Zawadowska with a paper on “‘Double Strangers’. Conversion of Women to Judaism in the Cairo Geniza Documents.” In his analysis of cases of conversion of women attested by Cairo Genizah manuscripts from the 11th to the 13th century, he showed how all of them were “strangers” in more than one way, by religion, gender (through their lower social status) and sometimes ethnicity. He examined the discrepancy between these women’s self-perception and the way they were perceived by the community, as

well as the differences in treatment between female and male converts/foreigners.

Z. Stampfer from the Research Authority of Orot Israel College was planned to speak next, but unfortunately, he had to cancel his participation. F. Jakubowski from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań followed with a presentation on “Strangers by the Law: A Sharia Perspective on Others According to Mālikī Fatwās from Medieval Maghreb.” Based on an analysis of Mālikī fatwās from the Maghreb between the 9th and the 15th century,⁵ he illustrated how the marginalisation of individuals or groups within Muslim society is observable in Islamic legal rulings even though in theory, the sharīa treats all Muslims equally (cf. Q 49:13). His examples demonstrate that “equality” (Arab. *kafā’a*) could depend on various criteria like lineage, duration of the adherence to Islam, freedom, piety, occupation, and wealth.

Y. Erder from Tel Aviv University chaired the fourth unit on *Strangers and Estrangement Real and Imagined*. C. Adang from Tel Aviv University begun with a presentation on “Ibn ḥazm’s Self-portrayal as a Stranger in His Own Land,” in which she examined the broad literary legacy of the controversial scholar ibn ḥazm of Córdoba (d. 1064) and showed in a close textual analysis how even non-polemical works reflect his sense of alienation and otherness in a society that would eventually ban him and burn his books. His constant conflict with the religious and political authorities was fuelled particularly by his insistence on knowledge to be drawn from books (and not oral instruction) and on religious law to be inferred exclusively from the literal sense of the Quran and of those hadith which he deemed reliable.

Wilk gave the next paper on “Otherness and Politics in Zīrid Granada,” which dealt with the political situation of Zīrid Granada that led to the unprecedented mob uprising of by the Muslim population against the Jewish district in 1066. In particular, it examined the connection with the office of two Jewish viziers, Abū

⁵ His source is the collection *al-mi’yār al-mu’rib wa-l-ḡāmi’ al-muḡrib ‘an fatāwī ‘ulamā Ifrīqīya wa-l-Andalus wa-l-Maḡrib* by Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Wanṣarīsī (d. 1508), transmitted by al-Mahdī al-Wazzānī (d. 1923) in his *al-mi’yār al-ḡadīd*.

Ishāq Ismaʿīl ibn al-Naǧrīla also known as Shmuel ha-Nagid (d. 1056) and his son Abū Husayn, who died in the outbreak. After a detailed discussion of the available sources and the methodological issues they raise, Wilk showed how the anti-Jewish poem by the contemporaneous jurist Abū Ishāq al-Ilbīrī reflects the political uncertainties of the Taifa period and questioned the assumption that this specific poem triggered the upheaval of 1066.⁶ Rather, it captures the state of mind that brought about the events.

“Do Calendar Differences Cause a Social Rift?” asked N. Vidro from the University College London in the third and last paper of this session. Since calendars have long been recognized as structuring social, economic, and religious aspects of Medieval society, she examined whether a disagreement over time management could impact social cohesion.⁷ By means of various examples drawn from the Cairo Genizah documents (like an intermarriage contract stipulating special measures for the festival dates of both communities), she challenged this view and imposed a more nuanced picture of the relations between Karaites and Rabbanites. As shown by the manuscripts, the diverging calendars were even legitimized by the authorities and would only lead to problems on festival dates, if at all, and thus did not affect daily life.

Session five, chaired by Adang, was devoted to the *Status of Strangers and Converts in Religious and Secular Legislation* and started with a paper on “Jews as Strangers in Late Antiquity Jerusalem/Aelia Capitolina” by K. Stebnicka from the University of Warsaw. Stebnicka reminded the historical events on Emperor Hadrian that led to the Jewish ban from Jerusalem (newly called Aelia Capitolina) and showed that although no traces of Jews are to be expected before the end of the Roman rule, there are still clues as to their presence on the ruined Temple mount from the 4th century on, when Constantine allowed visits to the Temple once a year to commemorate its destruction. She then analyzed all known evidence for Jewish pilgrimages, including

⁶ This view was first taken by ibn al-ḥatīb in the 14th century.

⁷ This idea emerges 1958 with S. Talmon, “The Calendar of the Covenanters of the Judean Desert,” in *ibid.*, *The World of Qumran from Within* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989), 147–85 [revision of Talmon 1958], based on É. Durkheim theory on the requirements for the formation of groups.

the description found in the anonymous *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, Jerome's commentary on Zephania, and the pilgrim vessels that bear Jewish iconography.

Followed a presentation on "The Proselytes (*gerim*) in the Hebrew Bible According to the Early Karaites" by Erder, which examined how the Karaites made sense of the term "proselyte" (Hebr. *gēr*) in the Hebrew Bible and which was his status under Karaite law. While Yefet believes that the *gēr* is sometimes included in biblical law, others like Abū ʿĪsā al-ʿIṣfahānī do not think that the Torah addresses them at all. Based on the sometimes contradictory biblical text, Yefet distinguishes between the "convert" (Hebr. *gēr ṣedeq*; Jud. Arab. *gēr dīnī*) and the partially assimilated "stranger" (Hebr. *gēr ša'ar* or *gēr tōšāb*).

Given the absence of M. Herman from Yale University, Adang read out the last paper in this session on "Maimonides and Andalusian Legal Thought." Herman observed that Moses Maimonides' (d. 1204) views differed frequently from his predecessors'. He gave several examples of Maimonides' divergent juridical ideas and explained them in light of Almohad or Mālikī, or more globally Andalusian, legal thought of the time. This non-Rabbinic and most importantly Muslim influence enabled Maimonides to confront rabbinic literature with new ideas. As a conclusion, Herman encouraged future studies on both Jewish and Islamic legal traditions.

The sixth session on *Reflections on "the Other" and "the Other's" Scripture in Exegetical Literature*, chaired by M.-Á. Gallego from the Spanish National Research Council, begun with a presentation by M.L. Hjälms from the Stockholm School of Theology and Sankt Ignatios Theological Academy on "The Pedagogy of Failure: Eastern Christian Commentaries on Exile Psalms" and, in absence of the speaker, was read out by Zawadowska. In a context of growing interest for the reception history in biblical studies, Psalm 137 [LXX 136] has received much attention.⁸ Several studies have demonstrated how this psalm was adapted to new historical and geographical contexts and most

⁸ Cf., for instance, the study by S. Gillingham, "The Reception of Psalm 137 in Jewish and Christian Traditions," in *ibid.* (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms. Conflict and Convergence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64–82.

importantly how Jewish and Christian interpretation diverged. However, previous research has only taken into account the Western reception and Hjälm showed with examples in Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Arabic that the approaches developed by the Christian reception to make sense of the text was more complex. She concluded that these methods not only opposed Christians and Jews, but also divided Christians internally.

The other paper of this session was presented by M. Gómez Aranda from the Spanish National Research Council on "The Vision of the 'Other' in Menahem ha-Meiri's Commentary on Psalms." Two commentaries on the Bible of the Provençal halakhist and exegete Menahem ha-Meiri (d. 1315) have come down to us, one on Psalms, the other on Proverbs. Based on the first one, Gómez Aranda illustrated how ha-Meiri actualized expressions like "this long exile" and understood them as prophecies referring to the situation of Medieval Jews among the Christian "other." Gómez Aranda then showed how this view was probably influenced by the historical circumstances in Medieval Provence. Finally, he compared it with the much more positive ideas ha-Meiri expressed in his Talmud commentaries and noted the apparently divergent attitudes towards Christians in both kinds of literature (exegetical or halakhic).

The seventh session on *The Others, Their Languages and Deities* was chaired by I. Muñoz Gallarte from the University of Córdoba and started with Gallego's paper on "The 'Unsacred' Language of the Others: Jewish Views on Other Languages in the Andalusí Context." While the role of the Hebrew language in Jewish history has received much attention, Jewish attitude towards other languages is less known. According to Gallego, Andalusian Jews participated in reviving Hebrew as a literary language in an Arabic-Muslim environment, the golden age of "convivencia." She offered a detailed overview of the evolution of the use and perception of the various languages of Al-Andalus and the connection between linguistic and religious identity. Quoting various Arabic authors, she added that Muslims did not seem to consider the Jews as "non-Arab" speakers (Arab. *ʿaġamī*), but rather identified the Christian with the less prestigious dialectal Arabic.

Then, A. Grzybowska from the University of Warsaw presented her contribution on "The Self as the Other in the Jewish Literature of the

Egyptian Diaspora in the Hellenistic Period: The Case of the Letter of Aristeas.” Written by a Hellenized Jew of (probably) Alexandria, the *Letter of Aristeas* adopts an Hellenistic point of view by introducing a non-Jew as central figure to the text, thus allowing the author to approach his own culture as the culture of the “other.” Grzybowska then examined the aim and consequences of this construct and suggested, that although the purpose certainly was to bringing Jewish culture closer to a Hellenistic audience, the *Letter* in fact conveyed a positive image of the Hellenistic culture to the Jews.

J. Martinez Delgado from the University of Granada presented the last paper in this session on “The Treatment of Idols (asnam) in the Hebrew Bible According to Andalusí Hebrew Lexicography.” In an analysis of the rendering of the terms from the Hebrew Bible originally designating deities and idols, he showed that Andalusian lexicographers frequently resorted to absurd etymologies to mock them or to actualizing interpretative translations that aimed at neutralizing them (for instance, the *tārāpīm* used by Rachel were rendered by “astrolabes”). He argued that this practice was influenced by Islamic conceptions of figures and divinities.

The eighth session, devoted to *Power, Powerlessness and Expulsion* and chaired by Jakubowski, was opened by F. Astren’s paper on “A Doubly-Articulated Anomaly in the Muslim Past: The expulsion of Jews and Christians from the Hijaz under the Caliph ‘Umar”, read by Zawadowska. Astren explained how the expulsion of non-Muslims from the Hijaz under caliph ‘Umar was justified in the ninth- and tenth-century Muslim tradition. The different strategies developed in this context were part of a larger discourse on Muslim space including the Muslim character of cities and aimed at constructing firm communal boundaries to differentiate and legitimize the historically new Muslim fate.

Followed the presentation on “The Exile of Cain. A Passage in a Syriac and Arabic Apocryphal Source” by L. Bonhome Pulido from the University of Córdoba. She discussed the problematic passage of Gen 4:10–16, about Cain being sent to the land of Nod after having killed Abel in light of its reception in the parabiblical Syriac account of the *Cave of Treasures* and the Arabic translation. In a detailed analysis,

she showed how commentators identified the place of Cain's exile and how they dealt with this contentious biblical figure.

Then, B. Gryczan from the University of Warsaw spoke on "Stranger in Power: The Image of Shmuel ha-Nagid as a Jewish Dignitary at a Muslim Court in Contemporary Literature from al-Andalus." She analyzed how ha-Nagid's texts reflect his unusual biography and political activity as a non-Muslim at court. She argued indeed that his poetry is of a deeply biographical character that allows the reader to discover how he viewed himself and how he considered his status as the "other", first as a refugee from Cordoba and later as a stranger in power in Granada.

The last session, chaired by Delgado, was devoted to *Historical and Exegetical Narratives on Strangers* and begun with a presentation by Gallarte on "A Christian Out of Home: The Greek Sources of the Abgar's Legend Revisited." Gallarte stated the necessity of a new compilation and commentary on the sources of the legendary correspondence between Jesus and King Abgar V Ukkāmā of Edessa and scrutinized the main steps in the transmission of the legend, allegedly translated from a fourth-century Syriac original by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.13). He suggested that there had been a large oral tradition underlying the written witnesses and pointed to the popular use of the letters as amulets.

The next paper was given by Monferrer-Sala on "An Idumean among Nabateans and Romans: On the Source-text of a Passage in Maḥbūb al-Manbijī's Kitāb al-'Unwān." Monferrer-Sala examined carefully the possible sources of Maḥbūb al-Manbiḡī's tenth-century *Chronicle*. To this purpose, he compared the passage on Antipater's life with the earlier Greek accounts of Flavius Josephus' *War of the Jews* and Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*. He convincingly argued that Josephus was not the main source of al-Manbiḡī, and that although Eusebius contained several parallels, there had probably been an additional *Vorlage*. Monferrer-Sala then proceeded to compare the Arabic text to the Syriac version by Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) and concluded that they probably draw on another common source.

The final paper, prepared by D. Arad from Bar-Ilan University on "Muslim Rule in Jewish Eyes: Different Views and Approaches from

the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period,” had to be read out by Zawadowska. Arad examined late medieval and early modern Jewish thought on their Muslim neighbours and rulers as compared to the Christians. While previous research has dealt with the legal component of the Jewish-Muslim relations, he stressed the importance of examining the conceptual one. Illustrating his argument with quotes from various texts, he showed that the Jewish view of Islam heavily depended on the context. For example, the Talmudic dictum in b. Shabbat 11a ranks the Christian ruler as more comfortable as the Muslim ruler in manuscripts copied in Islamic countries, but the opposite happens in manuscripts copied in Christian countries. Arad concluded that Jews living in Muslim lands did not share the positivity of those in Christian lands on their Muslim rulers.



Greetings (Marzena Zawadowska, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala and Israel Muñoz Gallarte)



Session 4 (Mateusz Wilk, Yoram Erder and Camilla Adang)



Session 6 (María Ángeles Gallego, Mariano Gómez and Camilla Adang)



Participants on the Conference